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Winegrowing in Chile
By Luke Martin

Looking at history through a blurred lens may not be the most practical approach to viewing historical events, but considering how often one finds themselves intoxicated or at least the average person, perhaps the causation of such an effect is worth studying. Looking at the introduction of that source, the process of development, and the continuation of its importance over the course of Chile's development, offers us a different perspective. Just like observing the success and failures of civilizations due to their farming capabilities; focusing on irrigation, and crop rotation, producing wine to a higher level increases the success of that civilization in today's age. While not crucial for the survival as far as food it offers financial incentives to play a bigger role in society. Discovering ones natural resources is of paramount importance in today's day and age. Like the Middle East with its oil, Canada with its natural resources, Chile has its own specialties. This continually developing market is raging into its own and will be a strong economic staple as far as income is concerned. But how did this come about? Grape vines were not native to the area, and the basket of agriculture is a competitive for market for crops.

Between the coastal and Andean mountain ranges of Chile, lies a fertile valley of intense agriculture similar to our own Willamette Valley. Unlike our Valley it was cultivated by Spanish Missionaries who brought grains, vegetables, fruit and the grape vine. Chilean wines were not an instant success due to the porous ceramic jugs in which they were fermented, creating vinegar with in months. Innovative Chileans started coating the inside of these fermentation jugs with wax, unfortunately as it dissolved the effect was the same. This brought about Chilean appetite for wines with short shelf lives,

known as Chicha. Chicha is a sweet wine, due to the short fermentation process. This diversifies the consumers and increasing consumption.¹

Perhaps it is fate that brought the sweet wine first creating a fan base. For wine connoisseurs know that the entrance to the acquired tastes of high quality wines is through sweeter wines. It is the optimal stepping stone, like that of Marijuana to the drug world, but less dangerous, less addictive, and also profitable. Those who do fall under the curse of drinking find that expensive wine is not the road traveled. I find that this is an important distinction for wine brings with it class distinction. Like that of cigars in politics, it is the ability not only to be able to afford the wine, but the ability to have the acquired taste to enjoy the wine. Like many Latin American short stories, class is an important distinction made. This is accompanied with the unspoken night life. Chile is a rapidly developing country naturally creating a separation gap in class. This awkward phase is pushed by the upper-class, as they drive the progress by the work of the lower-class. This inevitable relationship causes the upper-class to control what is produced, and for Chile one of the largest profit possibilities for the land is the grape vine. While it doesn't provide for the lower-class, it does bring in money to the country. This is similar to the problem the south had in the U.S. The profit was in cotton and thus they over produced cotton; creating a demand for basic crops that were not being produced. This downward spiral was due to the people who owned the land trying to get max benefits from the land. While Chile is not to this drastic level of solo production, it is a possibility for their future with their increasing ability to produce a good quality wine. Thus

¹ Rector, John Lawrence. *The History of Chile*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2003. p. 43

showing a great example of learning from history. So what are the factors that may lead to such a future if not monitored?

Spanish missionaries established themselves in Chile bringing with them the Crown, Catholicism and European crops. Grape vines or *vitis vinifera*, being one of the most important and profitable of these crops for Chileans in the long term. The original grape planted by the missionaries is known as Pais in Chile, Mission in California and Criolla in Argentina. This grape is still very common in the local wines of Chile and Argentina. The first *vitis vinifera* was planted between 1547 to 1548 by Fray Francisco de Carabantes. The Spanish, who are known for their wine to this day, spread their culture not just to Chile but to all of the places it colonized. One can then make a comparison of what came about through the Spanish introduction of its agriculture to the places that it colonized. To avoid a deep explanation and statistic comparisons, Chile had and has the optimal location of all the places colonized for wine production. You don't hear of Mexican wines, Brazilians wines, and Argentinean wines are comparable.

The diversifications of wine did not start with Spain, but rather Rome. Around 300 B.C. to 500 A.D. Rome made great advancements on wine. They developed barrels for travel, bottles for storage, and used wine as a staple in their society. It became a large trading commodity, and spread through out Europe. Eventually this created competition with their own wine production, much like the case with Chile and Spain. But around 500 A.D. Rome was losing its infrastructure, leaving the church as the strongest foundation,

where the methods developed during the Roman reign survived showing the induction point to the churches involvement in the spread of grapes.²

Fermentation, which is the process of turning sugar into alcohol with yeast, takes time. The longer the wine has to ferment the more alcohol till a certain point. Some wines age longer, meaning that they are able to withstand time in a bottle without going bad. The lack of the Chilean wines to do this was a direct result in their inability to store wines in the fashion in which they needed to be kept. But this is a facility problem not a local problem. As far as location goes, Chile was and is an ideal location in many ways. First as already mentioned, is its fertile valley and diverse temperate zone. But perhaps more important today is its isolation from the world. This seems strange but the lack of phylloxera in Chile, a pest similar to the aphids, feed on the roots of grape vines.³ Today this pest free situation as it is the most devastating pest to grapes, gives Chile an edge on world competition, allowing for higher yields from the plants. Wineries usually cut off a certain percentage of the grapes up to 60 % to get richer grapes. The root damage done by the Phylloxera, the root eating bug causes for weaker absorption of the minerals from the soil. This causing either a weaker wine or requiring a larger grape removal during the growing season.

While a market controlled by outside influence, it is quickly becoming a competitor amongst the United States, and Europe. The dry summers and mild winters reflect that of California, around Santiago are booming with success. Not only is this a profitable export but to the north where the weather is warmer, grapes are being grown to

² Douglas, Adams. Introduction to WineMaking. Davis, California: Waterhouse, 2002. p. 35 – 36.

³ Douglas, p. 68 – 69.

grow their national drink, pisco, a type of brandy. I confess that I have had a chance to indulge in this beverage, having a bottle brought back from Chile by a friend. If I had not tried the wine I would vouch for their national drink, but having tried both, they are on a track for success all around.⁴ The national drink of Chile was brought about through the colonization of the Spanish. It seems strange to have a national beverage be an introduced fruit. Although the Pisco brandy was developed in Chile as an extension to what was brought over. This was during an age of shared ideas creating an explosion of human thought, hardly a time to worry about national pride.

While Pisco is the national beverage, it was wine that was reportedly mixed with gun powder and then consumed which allegedly gave the Chileans the ability to overcome odds in the wars against the Bolivians, and Peruvians.⁵ It is important to realize that wine or alcohol has played major roles through out history. But it is never the focus of causation, or major change. It is the dormant factor that passes unnoticed even in today's society. If one were to look at the influence alcohol around the world, one would be overwhelmed and at a loss of where to start. Economically, socially, and in virtually all aspects of life find a tie to alcohol. It became a weapon in the U.S. against the Native Americans. It was the wine land taken over by the peasants during the French revolution in 1789, creating individual plots, creating the wine country set up today of France, and its effects are still found to this day. One only needs to look at the names of the wines for they are related to the church in Europe.⁶ This one example demonstrates one of countless historical impacts of alcohol. It shows us the value of Chilean wine production

⁴ Douglas, p. 69

⁵ Rector, p. 8

⁶ Douglas, p. 36

and use. The introduction of wine comes below slavery and the introduction of Christianity in the level of historical importance but few other factors.

Modern influence on the land by foreigners led to an induction of current technology in the winery. Socialist President Salvador Allende was responsible for expropriating not only copper mines but also land from Chilean citizens. This redistribution of land brought about a shift in local agriculture production to a focus on exports, such as wine to the United States and other regions. Once traditional ties to the land became a business relationship with foreign investors.⁷ Today most of the wine produced in Chile is exported, specifically targeted to the U.S. Foreigners also brought with them present wine making techniques. This included a shift from native rauli wood fermentation tanks to temperature-controlled stainless steel. American and French oak barrels were imported and became common use in aging process of Chilean wine.⁸ But it is not merely the new technology that they have to their disposal, but their ability to compete with lower prices to work their way into the industry. Since the land suitable for growing is limited they find themselves in the position of being able to utilize cheaper labor due to the lower cost of living conditions. So they can produce the same quality wines for less. This is directly related to the conditions in which the colonizing countries put them in. As it turns out it is putting them in a fast seat ride to success.

Having grown up in the Catholic Church I am aware that during the ceremony wine and bread are handed out as a symbol of the body and blood of Christ. This relation of wine to church, as small as it is, is still a symbolic representation. Part of the reason

⁷ Rector, p. 190-194

⁸ Wines of Chile Members, "Wines of Chile."

<http://www.winesofchile.org/template_completo.php?cnt_cdg=1262> Accessed 3 June 2007

for the introduction of the grape vine to the Churches mission sites. It has been recorded that as early as 3000, to 1000 B.C. wine was tied to royalty and religious ceremonies in Egypt. While not that of Christianity, it shows its ties to upper-class and religion all the same.⁹

Having looked at wine through the ages, with a strong focus on Chile and its future in wine from a historical perspective, one can greater appreciate not only a Chilean wine, but the history in which it was brought about. It gives us a hopeful view of a flourishing economy, at least as far as agriculture goes, as long as they pay head to the lessons of history. It is amazing at the problems that can be avoided by the simple acknowledgement of history. If current President Bush had only taken a few classes in history, he would have quickly realized that his call for Iraq as the new crusades was a foolish and largely embarrassing one. The acts committed during the crusades are not acts that anyone with knowledge in history would own as a leading example. As things are situated now it seems that Chile, and Argentina is looking strong for their productions, and on their proper course to maintain a balanced equilibrium.¹⁰

The problem that does face Chile in its wine production is the balance of where that wealth is distributed. Being an agricultural production the workers are often paid little and the owners acquire the bulk of the profits. Wine however does take a reasonable amount of knowledge, it is dependent on who gets these types of jobs and if Chile embraces wine making fully into their culture, or if it is to be largely controlled by outside influence as has been in historically.

⁹ Douglas, p. 35

¹⁰ Martin, Robert (interview)

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